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ABSTRACT

The project of which this study is a part has as its broad aim the exploration of psychosocial factors associated with pregnancy among adolescent females. Over the last 30 years, the idea of moral development as a strong and pervasive influence on an individual's behavior has become an integral part of thinking about childhood and adolescence, although specific associations between moral development and adolescent pregnancy have been virtually unstudied. This study compared the moral reasoning, identity formation, and role traditionality of pregnant (N=8) and non-pregnant (N=9) adolescent females ranging in age from 14-18. Subjects who were more highly developed in identity were also likely to be higher in moral reasoning, but lower in role traditionality. Pregnant adolescents were more likely to be rated higher on the interpersonal components of identity status than on the occupation portion; non-pregnant females showed a greater orientation toward occupational goals. The groups were indistinguishable in terms of role traditionality. Plans are underway to extend this study to a larger and more cooperative sample. Results from this line of inquiry will strengthen the conceptual links among moral reasoning, identity formation and sex role, as well as increasing understanding of the developmental features of adolescent sexuality. (ABL)

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# Moral Development, Identity Formation and Role Traditionality in Pregnant and Non-Pregnant Adolescents

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# Moval Development, Identity Formation, and Role Traditionality in Pregnant and Non-Pregnant Adolescents

The project of which the present study is a part has as its broad aim the exploration of psychosocial factors associated with pregnancy among adolescent females. Specifically, its purpose is to compare pregnant and non-pregnant teenagers on three measures: level of moral reasoning, identity status, and orientation to traditional feminine roles. The data reported here are from an initial pilot study, and should be interpreted in that context.

Over the last three decades, the idea of moral development as a strong and pervasive influence on an individual's behavior has become an integral part of our thinking about childhood and adolescence (Kohlberg, 1966; Krebs & Gillmore, 1982; Rest, 1984; Rest, Turiel, & Kohlberg, 1969). Several authors have found links between level of moral reasoning and decision-making in adolescents (McGee, 1979; Rest, 1984; Weiss, 1982). Other researchers have discussed the relationship between moral reasoning and education (de Vos, 1984; Kaplan, 1983; Leming, 1985; Nucci, 1982; Sullivan, 1980). Specific associations between moral development and adolescent pregnancy have been virtually unstudied.

Identity formation as the major developmental task of adolescence has been theorized by Erikson (1963, 1968) and operationalized by Marcia (1980). Important factors related to identity development are parent and family (Clarke & Kleine, 1984a; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Loy & Norland, 1981; Van Wicklin, 1984); peer influence (Asbridge, 1984; Ellis & Davis, 1982; Hayes, 1982; Loy & Norland, 1981); and sexual decision making (Hopkins, 1982; Marcia & Friedman, 1970; Schenkel & Marcia, 1972). Complex associations among identity status, traditional feminine role, and career aspirations in females have been suggested by a number of authors (Archer, 1985; Clarke & Kleine, 1984a; Lutes, 1981; Morgan & Farber, 1982; Smart, 1980). Additionally, there is theoretical and empirical support for a relationship between identity formation and moral development (Gilligan, 1977; Olson & Berkowitz, 1983; Podd, 1972).

In the present study, it was expected that pregnant subjects would score lower in the areas of moral reasoning and identity formation, and higher in role traditionality than their non-pregnant peers. No formal hypotheses were tested.

## Method

### Subjects

A total of 17 adolescent females from a rural county in the Southeastern United States participated in the study. The county in

which the research was conducted has for several years ranked at the top of the nation in rates of unmarried teenage pregnancy.

Eight pregnant girls were recruited through a federally funded adolescent parenting program operating locally. Their ages ranged from 14-18, $\bar{X}$=16.75. Nine non-pregnant girls were contacted through a list provided by their high school counselor. Their age range was 15-17, $\bar{X}$=16.13.

The extremely small sample size is believed to result from an unwillingness on the part of young girls and their parents to participate in research of this type, as well as the less-than-enthusiastic support of local school officials. However, the sample included equivalent proportions of blacks and whites in both groups, and there were no differences in social class across groups.

Measures

Level of moral development was measured by the Social Reflection Questionnaire (Gibbs & Widaman, 1982), a self-administered instrument that yields a measure of moral reasoning congruent with Kohlberg's standard interview (Kohlberg, 1966).

Identity status was determined through the interview schedule formulated by Grotevant and Cooper (1981), which is an extension of Marcia's Identity Status Interview (1964).

Orientation to traditional feminine sex role was measured by the Index of Sex Role Orientation (Dreyer, Wood, & James, 1981). This questionnaire is comprised of 20 Likert-type items that tap subjects' attitudes and opinions about a range of traditional and nontraditional female activities.

Procedure

Subjects were interviewed individually by the third author. The Identity Status Interview was administered first; after a short break, the subject was shown into an adjoining room where she completed the ISRO and the SRQ on her own.

## Results

Links among moral reasoning level (measured by the SRQ), role traditionality (measured by the ISRO), and subject's age were explored through correlational analyses across groups. No statistically significant correlation coefficients emerged. One trend that deserves mention, however, is an inverse association between scores on the ISRO and the SRQ ($r = -.42$, $p<.10$). Apparently, girls who held less traditional attitudes toward women's roles also tended to make more mature moral judgments. Due to the small sample size, further attempts at quantitative analysis were abandoned in favor of more descriptive reporting. Also, the four identity statuses derived from the interview were collapsed into two

levels. Subjects classified as Identity Achieved or Moratorium were combined as a "High Status" group, while Identity Foreclosed and Identity Diffused subjects comprised the "Low Status" group. This grouping was done on the basis of the presence of subjects' self-exploration in the High group, as contrasted with little or no self-exploration in the Low group. It is believed that a period of exploration and experimentation is required for a more differentiated and complex identity formation (Fitch & Adams, 1983).

The six components of identity status (Occupation, Politics, Religion, Friendship, Dating, and Sex Role) were analyzed separately, across pregnant and non-pregnant groups. The Politics component was dropped, however, because only 3 subjects showed development beyond Identity Diffusion. This low level of political awareness and activity was not unexpected (cf. Clarke & Kleine, 1984b).

Most of the subjects (70%) were rated High on the Occupation component, showing higher levels of moral reasoning and lower levels of traditionality than their low-identity peers. A different pattern emerged on the Religion component: 82% of subjects fell into the Low group (most were Identity Foreclosed), but were higher in moral reasoning as well as traditionality. The majority of subjects (70%) were rated High on

the Friendship component, and showed high levels of both moral reasoning and traditionality (see Table 1).

For Dating and Sex Role, the two components most closely linked to heterosexual relationships, nearly identical patterns emerged. For both components, the sample was evenly split between High and Low levels of identity formation, with the High status group scoring higher in moral reasoning and lower in traditionality (see Table 1). This link between thinking about moral issues and thinking about sexuality has been noted in earlier identity studies of college men in western Canada (Rogow, Marcia, & Slugoski, 1983), and college women in the southwestern United States (Clarke & Kleine, 1984b). The present findings are consistent with this relationship.

In sum, then, we could say that subjects who were more highly developed in identity were also likely to be higher in moral reasoning, but lower in role traditionality.

## Conclusions

Despite the limitations of sample size, a few cautious conclusions may be drawn from the results of this study. Pregnant subjects, whose mean SRQ score was higher than that of the non-pregnant subjects ($\bar{X}_{preg}$ = 267, $\bar{X}_{n.p.}$ = 242), appeared to be comfortable with their situation, and did not foresee any insurmountable obstacles in their

future plans. With regard to identity formation, they were more likely to be rated High on the interpersonal components than on Occupation. Non-pregnant girls, in contrast, showed a greater orientation toward occupational goals, and were more often classified as Identity Foreclosed on Dating and Sex Roles. The groups were indistinguishable in terms of their role traditionality. Both groups tended toward Identity Foreclosure in Religion, which may be interpreted in the context of the strong regional value for organized religion. With regard to Friendship, both groups tended toward Identity Achievement. This finding is consistent with previous studies detailing the richness and intimacy of girls' friendships in adolescence (see Manners, 1985, for a review).

The associations between high levels of moral reasoning and high identity formation found in the full sample may be viewed in the context of cognitive development. Adams, Abraham, & Markstrom (1987) found that Identity Diffused youth were the most self-focused, while Identity Achieved subjects were least self-focused. The notion of "self-focus" is central to models of social cognition, which is itself a prerequisite to moral development (Selman, 1980). Future research in this area might include a more direct measure of social cognition.

This ongoing research is grounded in the notion that the behavior and decision making of teenagers cannot be understood apart from the

developmental processes operating during adolescence. Because sexual expression, contraception, and pregnancy all involve individual decisions, it is therefore reasonable to study the social phenomenon of early parenthood from a developmental prespective. The present investigation has been valuable in terms of laying groundwork for future research. Plans are presently underway to extend this study to a larger and more cooperative sample. Results from this line of inquiry will strengthen the conceptual links among moral reasoning, identity formation and sex role, as well as increasing our understanding of the developmental features of adolescent sexuality. Ultimately, of course, these results will be useful to those educators and policy makers who are concerned with preventing unwanted pregnancies among adolescents.

Identity Status by Component Across Groups

| Component | Status (N) | SRQ Mean | ISRO Mean |
|---|---|---|---|
| Occupation | High (12) | 237 | 34.8 |
| | Low (5) | 224 | 47.8 |
| Religion | High (3) | 211 | 40.3 |
| | Low (14) | 248 | 43.8 |
| Friendship | High (12) | 257 | 40.2 |
| | Low (5) | 212 | 36.3 |
| Dating | High (9) | 264 | 35.1 |
| | Low (8) | 248 | 41.5 |
| Sex Role | High (9) | 266 | 35.7 |
| | Low (8) | 242 | 39.3 |

Table 1

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